

## A Powerful Confluence: The Transformative Power Inherent in Young Adult Literature and Young Readers

### An Interview with Melanie Crowder

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As someone who appreciates young adult literature (YAL) and who recognizes the importance of encouraging and supporting young readers, I think that the best day of the entire academic year may well be the one that occurs annually at the Literature Festival, held on the campus of Washburn University in Topeka, Kansas. Every fall the Literature Festival brings together outstanding YA authors from across the country and hundreds of enthusiastic middle and high school readers from around Kansas and Missouri, resulting in a day that both shines an important spotlight on and celebrates readers, writers, and great books.

For 25 years, the Literature Festival has celebrated the important work done by YA writers and YA readers—and has brought those writers and readers together—just as it did once again this past October 2<sup>nd</sup>, when the Literature Festival welcomed author Melanie Crowder from her home on the Colorado Front Range for a day filled with presentations, discussions, autograph sessions, and book talks. The author of *Audacity*, *Three Pennies*, *An Uninterrupted View of the Sky*, and *A Nearer Moon* (among other notable titles), Crowder and her wide-ranging, remarkable books have received a great deal of critical acclaim, including recognition as a National Jewish Book Award Finalist, a Jr. Library Guild Selection, and a YALSA Top Ten Books for Young Readers. Crowder is an accomplished writer, an engaging speaker, and a steadfast advocate for YAL who clearly takes both her craft and her readers seriously. Throughout the day at the Literature Festival, her appreciation for and kindness toward her young readers came through consistently, as she visited with, connected to, and laughed with her many new fans—both young and old—here in Kansas.

My interview with Melanie took place on what would properly be described as an idyllic autumn afternoon, made even more pleasant for the fact that it took place while we were meeting on a beautiful college campus, the best place to spend a fall day, as far as I'm concerned. Taking a break from her busy day with the young readers who were excited to hear her presentation, enthusiastic about asking her questions regarding her writing and her books, and keen to take selfies with her at every turn, Melanie and I stole a few moments to have a conversation outside the Memorial Union, amidst the hustle and bustle of a typical college campus: Students burdened with backpacks were dutifully hiking to and from classes, the sun played its part by shining clear and bright, and the leaves were turning—a sensational day for those who enjoy the atmosphere of a university campus. The only potential fly in this ointment came courtesy of a riding lawnmower that persisted, every few minutes, in roaring past the park bench we were sharing throughout the duration of the entire interview, drowning out the otherwise serene setting for our interview. Taking this noisy turn of events in stride and with good humor, Melanie settled in for a 15-minute conversation that ranged from discussions of YAL, young readers, and her own history as a writer.

Our conversation launched forth on a perfectly natural point—the Literature Festival that brought her to Kansas. The interview, coming as it did right in the midst of a day designed to bring young readers and books and authors together, started off with a focus on the importance of young readers having the opportunity to connect the books they love with the authors who craft those stories. While my first question focused on the importance of placing young readers into close proximity to the authors who create the stories they love, Melanie quickly and correctly noted that

those young readers bring equally important stories with them—and that those personal narratives inform the reading transaction in crucial ways:

**Kienholz:** We are conducting this interview in the midst of an extremely busy day of presentations, Q & A sessions, book signings, and meet-and-greets. What do you hope that these young readers will take with them from a day like this one at the Literature Festival?

**Crowder:** Well, I can remember when I was very young . . . I don't know who the author was who came to speak with us, but it was a similar event, and I remember meeting an author, face to face, and I remember being able to hear, I guess the intent behind their stories and the passion behind their ideas. I found that to be really inspirational and I hope that students would take away from today the idea that their ideas and their stories are just as valuable. And that, yes, it's a lot of work to become a published author but we absolutely want to hear their stories and we absolutely want what's in their hearts on the page in the future, whether they become writers or not. Whatever they have to contribute to society, that we're looking forward to it. We need their active engagement in our world and they have so much to offer and we want to hear it.

Melanie Crowder's writing navigates fluidly between and among an impressive variety of literary forms and genres. Take these examples: In a blend of historical fiction and verse novel, *Audacity* recounts the harrowing labor conditions in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that led to the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire as well as a glimpse in the heroic efforts of protagonist Clara Lemlich. *An Uninterrupted View of the Sky* tackles the contemporary issue of prison reform in Bolivia in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. And *A Nearer Moon* moves into the realm of fantasy, with its inclusion of water sprites, legends, and magic. Crowder operates confidently in all of these different spheres, but it's her strong focus on characters—an ability to develop fully realized individuals on the page—that serves as a consistent link among Crowder's books, imbuing each with a literary quality that renders characters with which her readers connect, identify, and draw inspiration. Quite often, Crowder's characters struggle against antagonists that take the form of massive, overwhelming social and political systems which exert enormous power over her protagonists. Our conversation turned next to the genre of literature she is most comfortable writing as well as to her interest in exploring power dynamics when characters find themselves fighting against systems larger than themselves:

**Kienholz:** Your books cover a great deal of literary territory: historical fiction, fantasy, contemporary fiction, prose, verse, and so on. Where do you find your greatest comfort level as a writer?

**Crowder:** That is such a tough question. You know, it was really interesting, when I started writing in free verse for *Audacity* I was not comfortable *at all*. I was very self-conscious, I was very nervous about stepping outside of the norm and stepping outside of the traditional prose novel. But once I set my concerns aside, once I just gave myself permission to really dive into the form, I actually found that that was where I found my greatest freedom, where I found the most versatility. I found that when I began writing my next young adult book, I wanted to write that one in poetry . . . and I actually pulled myself back because I didn't want to end up writing the same kind of tone, the same voice, the same character in what was really two extremely different books. So I pulled away from poetry even though perhaps, that is my most natural form.

**Kienholz:** In preparation for this interview, I read *Audacity*, *Three Pennies*, and *An Uninterrupted View of the Sky*—and enjoyed all three books immensely. All three novels feature a protagonist fighting against a system of some sort that threatens their wellbeing. (In *Audacity*, it's management and an unfair economic system. In *Three Pennies*, it's a foster care system and, thanks to a setting in San Francisco, plate tectonics. And in *An Uninterrupted View of the Sky*, it's a legal and educational system.) Can you talk a little about your interest as a writer in exploring how people, especially young people, react when faced with difficult situations and challenged by systems bigger than themselves?

**Crowder:** Well, I think that's the reality of being a kid or being a teen. You're not necessarily in control of your own life. You have adults around you, hopefully caring, responsible adults with your best interests at heart, shaping your path or helping you make good decisions or teaching you how to make good decisions once you achieve independence. But the truth is, is that not all kids have the kind of role models, or not all kids live in a situation where those freedoms are a reality, where it's a nurturing, safe place for them to be in their own homes. And so, I suppose I speak to that future freedom that they're reaching towards, or I speak to the kids who are stuck. I know what that feels like to be stuck when you're young in a place that isn't safe or that isn't in your best interest. And, I just want to reach out through my stories to kids who are stuck like that, who feel like they don't have the freedom yet to put themselves in a positive situation and to give them hope that they will have the ability to move beyond their circumstances if they hold true to themselves, if they believe in themselves, and if they are willing to step out and be bold in some uncertain times.

Though her characters often find themselves pitted against seemingly (though not quite) irresistible systems clothed in enormous power, Melanie Crowder never leaves these characters, or her readers, without hope. Built on a foundation of agency and courage, the optimism that her characters carry into and through the challenges they face is characteristic of YAL in general, insofar as the endings of her books leave her readers understanding that even in the midst of trouble, hope persists and, to one degree or the other, personal courage triumphs. Our conversation veered next into a discussion of the role that she sees for hope and optimism not only in the plotlines of her books, but also in the lives of her readers:

**Kienholz:** In *Three Pennies*, you describe a scene when Marin begins to settle into her new room in her foster mother's home this way: "The room was still bare: white walls, white bedposts, white sheets. But it was no longer waiting. There was an occupant, however slight, however reluctant. And with her, frail as it may have been, came hope." How do you see the role of hope and optimism in literature that is written for a young adult audience?

**Crowder:** Well, you know it really circles back to your last question. This idea that young people, my young readers, may not yet be in a situation where they are able to grab their own destiny and move forward. There may be restrictions around them because of their age where they are not able to step forward and create the life that they want. That's the sense of hope that I feel is appropriate for this age group in that their future is still forward, it is still ahead of them. No matter what your circumstances are, no matter what difficulties you are finding in your life, you can still create a better future for yourself and I think that's something unique to this readership. That's not something you can always say to, you know, someone who's reading a book in their seventies. Perhaps there's not that opportunity for

them to create a whole new life and start at the beginning whereas someone who is looking forward to the rest of their life ahead of them, that sense of hope is a very real thing. No matter how rough your circumstances at any given time, your future is ahead of you, and it may be more difficult for some than others, but you can make something beautiful out of your life.

In addition to Crowder's ability to render believable, complex characters struggling against complex systems that threaten, oppress, and restrain, she also offers her readers another important element common to great books: prose that is far more than utilitarian—prose that borders on the lyrical. Crowder's evident interest in language comes through clearly in all of her books, and her readers are rewarded with language that, on one hand, is quite lovely and, on the other hand, reminds her readers that language has a power of its own. Crowder's facility with language results in books that are a pleasure to read, to be sure, and that are occasions to consider the ways in which words can shape—and reshape—our lives:

**Kienholz:** Your characters often recognize the incredible power that words can have in their lives. The power to change laws. The power to change one's circumstances. The power to deal with trauma. As you see it, what is the connection between agency in a young person's life and the power of language—the power of words?

**Crowder:** Well, I think for so many, language is the way that the world forms their judgement of us. How we present ourselves is the way that the world sees us. I actually spent five years as an ESL teacher, and my purpose as I saw it in that job was to help students who didn't yet have the ability to speak English as a native speaker, or someone who wasn't yet proficient in this new language to them. My job was to help them so that the rest of the world could see their heart, their soul, their intelligence. So that they could communicate to the world and be seen for their intelligence and not for something that they didn't yet possess, which was their ability to speak English fluently. For me, that was such a powerful role to be in, and I feel like that's what really all students, not necessarily only the ones who want to be writers themselves, but all of us - What we put out to the world is usually in spoken or written form, and that's the basis with which we make our introduction to the world. And, learning to choose words carefully is something that, I don't know that our society is valuing highly at the moment, and I think it's something that is incredibly important to think, to be reasoned, to be measured, and then when you say something to have your full heart and soul in the meaning behind it.

With our interview drawing to a close and with the riding lawn mower making one final, noisy pass near the bench we were sharing, I was struck by the fact that even in a relatively brief 15-minute interview, Melanie Crowder managed to shine a clear light on a number of issues related to her writing and about her readers: She takes the art and craft of writing extremely seriously. She views the young readers of her books as worthy of the best writing possible. She appreciates language and the power it can wield in our lives. And she recognizes the potential for agency that exists when serious books make it into the hands of serious young readers—a powerful combination that reminds us all about the alchemy that occurs in the literary experiences of the readers we meet every day in our own classrooms.

**Author Biography**

Kevin Kienholz is a professor in the Department of English, Modern Languages, and Journalism at Emporia State University, where he works primarily with undergraduates preparing to teach middle and high school English. He joined the faculty at ESU in the fall of 2000 after having taught high school English for seven years in his home state of Oklahoma.